



## UNITED STATES BOARD ON GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

*In reply please use this address:*

523 NATIONAL CENTER  
RESTON, VIRGINIA 22092

October 8, 1982

Mr. Dafydd Orwig  
Chairman, Welsh Atlas Panel  
Cilcafán, Braichmelyn  
Bethesda  
Bangor, Gwynedd  
Wales

Dear Mr. Orwig:

Your August 11 letter to the National Geographic Society, in which you inquired about the origins of certain United States geographic names containing colors, was referred to this office. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names is responsible by law for standardizing geographic names used in Federal publications.

The sources available to this office have provided the following information:

See subject file

### Blue Mountains, Oregon-Washington

The color of these mountains was recorded in 1851 as the origin of the name by Reverend Gustavus Hines, "As you approach the Blue Mountains from the south, particularly on the Umatilla and Walla Walla Rivers, the hills disappear, and you find yourself passing over a beautiful and level country, about twenty-five or thirty miles broad, on the farther borders of which rise with indescribable beauty and grandeur, that range which, from its azure-like appearance, has been called the 'Blue Mountains.'" (Edmond S. Meany, Origin of Washington Geographic Names, 1923, p. 23).

### White Mountains, California and Nevada

Named for White Mountain Peak which was known to the Indians as Tos-toya (from to so, "light-colored rock," and toya, "mountain".) The peak is named for the appearance of its summit which seems to be composed of dolomite, often mistaken for snow. (Erwin G. Gudde, California Place Names, 1969, p. 363).

### White Mountains, New Hampshire

The mountains are so named because they exhibit a "bright appearance which gives them the appellation of "white." They were originally referred to as White Hill by Governor Winthrop in 1642. (Eliphalet and Phinehas Merrill, Gazetteer of the State of New Hampshire, 1817, pp. 208-209).

### Green River, Utah, Colorado and Wyoming

The name is the English translation of the Spanish name Rio Verde bestowed upon it by explorers in 1818 because of the verdant appearance of its timbered banks and islands or because of the green shale through which it flows. (Rufus W. Leigh, Five Hundred Utah Place Names, 1961, pp. 33-34).

### White River, Colorado and Utah

The name is a translation of the Spanish Rio Blanco, given by the explorers about 1800 for the white cliffs along its canyon walls. Rio Blanco is retained in the name of Rio Blanco County, Colorado (Leigh, pp. 107-8).

### White River, Arkansas and Missouri

The name is descriptive and is shown on colonial maps as "R. Blanche" reflecting the French ownership of the area at that time. (Robert L. Ramsay, Our Storehouse of Missouri Place Names, 1952, p. 84).

### Black Range, New Mexico

The mountains have received the name from the dark appearance of the pine forest on their slopes when viewed from a distance.

### Canadian River, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas

The Canadian River, has a controversial history as far as its name is concerned. In his book, Oklahoma Place Names (1933), Charles N. Gould states the following:

"The Osage name for this stream was Ne-sout-che-bra-ra. Mr. Joseph B. Thoburn, one of our best authorities on Oklahoma history, suggests that the name Canadian was first given by French traders and trappers, who, during the eighteenth century, ascended the Arkansas River and its tributaries, bartering with the Indians. Many of these men came originally from Canada, and, wishing to commemorate the name of their native country, they very probably gave the name Canadian to this, the largest tributary of the Arkansas, near the mouth of which they had established a temporary camp or trading post." (pp. 23-24)

In a footnote, Gould gives this additional information:

"A popular explanation of the derivation of this term is that the word is derived from the Spanish Cañada or Canadiano, either word being the diminutive of canyon, and referring to the canyon through which the river flows for a distance of more than fifty miles in eastern Mora and San Miguel counties, New Mexico. But Mr. Thoburn calls attention to the fact that in its upper course, the South Canadian was originally known as Rio Colorado or Red River, and that the latter name is still used in New Mexico." (p. 24)

The following excerpts are from "New Mexico Place Names: A Geographical Dictionary," edited by T.M. Pearce, The University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1965.

"Canadian River. When Frederick Webb Hodge prepared his Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico (1907), he gave the Caddo Indian word Kanahatino, red river, as the source for the Red River of Louisiana and the Colorado River in south-central Texas, Colorado being Spanish for red....the Canadian River also called the Red River or the Canadian Red River, which starts in northern New Mexico...goes across Texas into Oklahoma, where it is known for a while as Beaver River. Finally, as the North Canadian River it joins the Arkansas. Canadian, then, as a place name could be derived from this word for red. However, in The Masterkey, XXIII (May 1949), p. 91, Dr. Hodge printed a quotation from the journal of Lt. J.W. Abert describing an excursion to the river and the great canyon through which it flows, and he thus seemed to favor the derivation of the the name from Canada, and the original name as Canadian. But Mapa de los EUM (1828) shows the stream as Canadiano Rio, without the n, which would favor a Spanish adaptation of the Indian Kanahatino, red river. The red salt which washes down in time of floods to color the water is responsible for the descriptive name. Spanish land titles call it the Rio Rojo, red river, as well as the Rio Canadian...." (pp. 24-25)

The Board on Geographic Names has a decision on this stream showing its extent, for use in Federal publication, which we quote below.

Canadian River: stream about 900 miles long, heading in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains just north of the Colorado-New Mexico border, at about 37°00'30" N, 105°03'00" W, and flowing generally southeastward into New Mexico, then eastward, through Texas and into Oklahoma, to the Arkansas River about 36 miles west of Fort Smith, Arkansas; Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas; 35°27'20" N, 95°02'00" W. Not: Little Red River, Red River, Rio Colorado, South Canadian River, Upper Canadian River.

### Red River, Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas

The name of this Red River comes from the color of the soil through which the stream flows and which it often carries to a great extent during flood periods. (Texas Historical Assoc., The Handbook of Texas, 1952, Vol. II, p. 450).

### ✓ Black Hills, South Dakota and Wyoming

The name, Black Hills, is a direct translation of the Sioux name, Paha Sapa, applied to the mountains because the dense growth of pine makes them appear black when viewed from a distance. About 1804-5 Lewis and Clark made the first reference to the mountains and called them "Black Mountains." (Edward C. Ehrensperger, WPA Project, South Dakota Place Names, 1941, p. 422)

### Red River of the North, North Dakota, Minnesota and Manitoba

As the waters of the stream are anything but red in color, the origin of the name appears to be in Ojibway and Chippewa Indian names which allude to "flaming sunset on its flat waters." French explorers called the stream Riviere Rouge which has been translated into English and American use. In July, 1944, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names approved the full name Red River of the North. (Thomas F. Waters, Streams and Rivers of Minnesota, 1978, p.110)

### Red Lake, Minnesota

Red Lake is translated also from the Ojibway name which refers to the red and vermilion hues of the smooth water surface reflecting the color of the sky. (Warren Upham, Minnesota Geographical Names, 1969, Their Origin and Historic Significance, p. 6)

### Blue Ridge, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia

The Blue Ridge is the easternmost range of the Appalachian Mountain system and was named for the hue which frequently encloses its distant summits. (Gannett, U.S. Geological Survey Bull. 258, 1905, p. 50).

### Green Bay, Wisconsin and Michigan

The Menominee Indian, name for this feature was 'Putiwikit' or 'puji-kit' meaning "a bay in spite of itself" or 'a bay in spite of everything.' Some scholars think that the early French settlers named the bay La Baie Verte for the deep greenish hue of the water. They also called it Baie de puants for the Winnebago Indians whom they called puants (stinkards).

The French also used the name La grande baie which is reported to have been corrupted into Green Bay by English-speaking settlers. Although originally in Michigan Territory, the bay subsequently became part of the State of Wisconsin, also. (Robert E. Gard and L.G. Sorden, The Romance of Wisconsin Place Names, 1968, p. 50).

We hope that this information will be useful to you in your project. If we can provide more information, please write to us.

Sincerely yours,

Donald J. Orth  
Executive Secretary  
Domestic Geographic Names

cc:  
RGN (2)  
jf file  
cg file/  
RES:RGR:RGN:PJSorvo:cg:10/8/82